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SUBJECT: GRP'S NSC GROPEs FOR ANSWERS TO "ISLAMIST
EXTREMISM"

Classified By: Pol/C Scott Bellard for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (C). Summary and Comment: National Security Adviser Norberto Gonzales provided Ambassador with a copy of a report he presented to the Philippine National Security Council on March 29 regarding Islamist extremism in the Philippines. Gonzales has asked us to treat it with due discretion but has encouraged us to "use it as we see fit with other allies," but we should not pass the text to third countries. He said he has shared it with Singapore already. He views the prognosis for the Philippines in particular as "bleak." He highlights that Islamist extremism in the Philippines was no longer a reaction to domestic events and policies, but rather increasingly a reflection of a "global war internal to the Muslims against so-called 'Muslim infidels' and the powers and nations that support the latter," i.e. the U.S. and, by extension, the Philippines. He expresses special concern that the eventual U.S. success in Iraq will lead to the dispersion of extremists to other part of the world, with the Philippines as an unfortunate "ideal host" due to the existence of Muslim insurgent groups and "conflicting Islamic denominations within Filipino Muslim communities. He calls upon the Philippines to "act decisively and hastily" (sic -- a Filipino-ism for "urgently"), while offering concrete suggestions only to eliminate private armies at Mindanao State University, re-launch an Islamic bank, and support Arabic teaching. He fails to raise more substantive goals of bringing economic development and better governance to Muslim Mindanao, meeting long-standing demands from local Muslims for more significant autonomy in the "Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao," improving counter-terrorism capabilities by Philippine security forces, and addressing the real factors that attract Christian converts and local Muslims to the more radical versions of Islam. Gonzales' think piece shows that at least some in the GRP recognize and are trying to grapple seriously with existential challenges to Philippine democracy and security. That so few plausible solutions apparently present themselves to GRP policy-makers underscores the importance of our intimate strategic and security engagement with the GRP. End Summary and Comment.

2. (C) Begin text of GRP National Security Adviser's document:

ISLAMIST EXTREMISM IN THE PHILIPPINES

OVERVIEW

This report provides a description of the changing face of Islamist extremism in the Philippines. These changes are still evolving in their incipient stages and are taking place against the backdrop of a resurgent threat of international terrorism.

We are aware of earlier attempts by international terrorist groups to conduct operations here in the Philippines. Our first real scare happened in 1995 when the government discovered and preempted a sinister plot, code named "Oplan Bojinka", to assassinate the Pope during his visit to Manila. Prior to that, our intelligence operatives have already noted the increased presence and influx of foreign trainors in MILF camps.

In recent time, the intelligence community has noted more such indications of international terrorist activities and infiltration works in the country. If these trends are not given immediate and proper attention by the government, our own Mindanao problem could eventually be transformed and drawn into the larger and more violent form of religious conflict that is now spreading across the globe.

ISLAMIST EXTREMISM

The early episodes of Islamist extremism in the Philippines were generally in response to local undertakings. The all-out military offensive of the Estrada administration against the MILF in 2002 became a justification for subsequent bombing attacks in various places in Mindanao and Metro Manila. The attack on the Buliok Complex in 2003 led to the Davao Airport and Sasa Wharf bombings in the same year. This was revealed by Mustaqim bin Abbas, the Indonesian JI leader who is now detained in Jakarta.

However, there are now indications that Islamist extremism in

the country is no longer a mere reaction to domestic events. The latest bombing attacks now appear to be religious-inspired - a seeming realization of a long-term agenda with religion becoming a central issue behind terrorist acts.

Nonetheless, the conflict is not between two religions. While there are continuing attempts to push the conflict as a religious war between Christianity and Islam, what is evolving is not so.

In the early nineties, the world began noticing a wave of Islamic revivalism which had an uncanny resemblance to the conflicts which occurred during the early years of Islam, sparked mainly by the death of the Prophet Mohammad. Four successive caliphates after his death had splintered Islam into warring groups which, to this day, we have reasonable ground to believe have been revived recently. This rivalry is now threatening to transform the global Islamic struggle into a more dangerous and violent race for supremacy among these competing factions.

The Islamist extremism that we are witnessing in the Philippines today are proxies to a global war internal to the Muslims against so-called 'Muslim infidels' and the powers and nations that support the latter.

The United States is considered as the foremost patron of major centers of political power in the Muslim world; defenders of an Islamic world that, to these fanatics, are governed by infidels to the faith and therefore deserving annihilation. The Philippines has become a target of these terrorist agenda because it is known as a loyal ally of the United States.

Given this framework, our current prognosis is bleak.

Within the wave of mainstream Islamic revivalism happening around us today, there is a violent, dogmatic and fanatical parallel that is rising with it. There is reason to predict that the threat of Islamist extremism will not wane but in fact swell, especially when a degree of political stability is obtained in Iraq.

Hundreds of restless elements of the Islamic faith composed of nationals from the Middle East and other Muslim countries - hardened veterans of the war in Iraq who purposely trained in it - will soon become unwelcome there. Once Iraq has become inhospitable for them, they will disperse to other parts of the world to spread their sinister misinterpretation of Islam and continue with their jihad of destruction and the irrational killing of innocents.

Two conditions make the Philippines an ideal host for these terrorists: the presence of Muslim armed groups in the South, ranging from separatists to bandits, and the presence of conflicting Islamic denominations within Filipino Muslim communities.

Although Professor Mur Misuari, detained MNLF leader, still remains to be an influential figure within the MNLF - especially among the Tausugs - it should be noted that in the Misuari wing of the MNLF, the religious leadership is gaining ascendancy.

As regards the MILF on the other hand, their lack of any political demand does not necessarily mean that peace negotiations with them will be any less difficult than what the GRP had experienced with the MNLF. It could also mean that the MILF has yet to resolve the issue of whether to accept autonomy or continue with their original "Islamization" objective.

"Islamization", as articulated by the late MILF Chairman Hashim Salamat in 1996, intended to influence how Islam should be practiced in Muslim Mindanao and how to purge the Muslim South of infidels through the creation of an Islamic enclave in Mindanao.

It should be noted that the original intent of the MNLF was to cleanse Muslim Mindanao of Datoism and the corruption of its political leaders. The MILF, on the other hand, was initiated to "cleanse" the Muslim South of its infidels.

The intelligence community has noted the following key indications of increased infiltration effort by international terrorist network in the Philippines. Two templates of Islamist extremism appear to be merging in the Philippines today: the direct Middle East (or Al Qaeda) template, and the Indonesian (Jemaah Islamiyah) template. This merger is best manifested in the confluence of the Abu Sayyaf Group and the Rajah Solaiman Revolutionary Movement.

The Abu Sayyaf Group, while notorious for their banditry, is introducing into the Philippines a fanatical folk religiosity that is suited to the needs of these international Islamist

extremists.

The Rajah Solaiman Revolutionary Movement, on the other hand is mostly composed of Christian converts who were directly indoctrinated and recruited by Middle Eastern missionaries; many of its members underwent JI training. There are also intelligence reports that some 70 Rajah Solaiman members have already joined the ASG. This reported connection with the Abu Sayyaf underscores this Mid-East attempt to directly import their brand of Islamist extremism to the Philippines.

It appears that the Abu Sayyaf and the Rajah Solaiman Group are the main organizations tapped by both the JI and the Al-Qaeda for their operations. However, trends indicate that for other armed Islamic organizations, these international terrorists prefer to tap, train and recruit their individual members.

As far back as 2000, after the launching of the deadly Rizal Day LRT bombings, investigations and interrogation of suspects revealed that there are some 30 JI members in Southern Philippines with 10-20 other Indonesian jihadists working closely together. The LRT attack was a JI-coordinated and sponsored plot executed by members of the MILF-Special Operations Group (SOG) operatives led by Moklis Yunos.

The launching of joint terrorist ventures between local Islamist extremists and the JI was further reinforced by the arrest of MILF-SOG member Sammy Abdulgani on April 2004. He admitted to authorities that he, together with JI leader Sulkipli, staged the Awang Airport bombing on 23 February 2003 as diversionary ploy to then ongoing conflict in Buliok. He further revealed that among those involved in the said bombing operation were detained JI leader Taufiq Rifqe and JI member who goes by the alias of Usman.

Usman is to later on take over as JI leader in the Philippines after Zulkifli was arrested in Sabah on September 2003. Abdulgani further revealed that when he was arrested, he and a small group of MILF-SOG were about to execute a mission to bomb a passenger ferry in major Mindanao ports. He said that the group was acting on orders and instruction by Usman.

Last year on October, another MILF-SOG member, Abdulmandap Mentang, was arrested. He revealed that before Zulkifli was apprehended, Zulkifli financed and ordered the bombing of the Davao City International Airport on 4 March 2003 and the Sasa Wharf on 2 April of the same year, again to ease military pressure in the Buliok area. When Mentang was arrested, he was conducting surveillance of the US Embassy in Manila.

Investigation into the February 2004 Super Ferry bombing also revealed that was a JI-coordinated terrorist plot carried out by the ASG and the Rajah Solaiman Revolutionary Movement (RSRM).

The government also foiled in 2003 a JI/ASG plot to attack various tourist destination resorts in the Visayas and maritime vessels plying the routes to and from Mindanao. On the other hand, the arrest of a leading RSRM member Marianno Lumarda, uncovered and preempted a plot to bomb the US and Saudi embassies in Manila.

A few days after last February 14's terrorist attacks in Metro Manila and Davao City, ASG member Gamal Baharan @ Tapat and Rajah Solaiman member Angelo Trinidad @ Abu Khalil Trinidad were nabbed as primary suspects. Later on, a third suspect, Gappal Bannah y Sali @ Boy Negro, surrendered.

Per testimony by Baharan, the JI and ASG cooperated in conducting seaborne training activities in preparation for a JI bombing plot on unspecified targets outside the Philippines. Trinidad is also a suspect in the Super Ferry bombing. Sali, on the other hand, also trained in a JI camp in Mindanao. Many of the members of groups with which major Islamist terrorist groups have conducted joint operations, such as the Rajah Solaiman Revolutionary Movement were trained by the JI.

This confirms intelligence reports that some 100 Islamist extremists have undergone training under the JI from the period 1996 to 1998 alone.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The religious temperament of its communities will determine if Muslim Mindanao will remain fertile ground for terrorists or will become inhospitable to these Islamist extremists.

Several factors are essential. A strong, affirmative government presence is important, particularly through our local government officials there. Learning institutions like the Mindanao State University must be rid of the presence of private armies and restore academic excellence. The Muslim south must be linked to a Islamic financial system by

re-launching the Al-Amanah Bank, allowing its ownership by wider, Muslim public. Government must also support and supervise the teaching of the Arabic language because this is their gateway to a deeper, more moderate understanding of the Koran. Establish cooperation and understanding with the Muslim South's religious leaders. Their influence will determine to which direction the scale will tip for the Muslim South:

We end this report with a reiteration of our major concern about the new challenges the Philippine government is confronting in the wake of the resurgence of global Islamist extremism.

The real and potential danger or threat posed by international terrorist trends has become more complex and disturbing. Old and bitter rivalries among warring Islamic factions are being revived, opening the stage for what appears geared towards a more violent struggle for supremacy through the conduct of terrorism all over the world.

More so now than in the past, the Philippines could become a preferred destination for the launching of infiltration work and terrorist operations by international terrorist groups. This is because of the country's terrorism-enabling environment that makes it an ideal springboard for the spread of Islamist extremism in these parts of the globe. If the trends we mentioned indicating increased linkages and cooperation between leading international terrorist groups and their local counterparts here would not be addressed immediately and properly, the risks would be unacceptably high. Failure on the part of the government to act decisively and hastily on the matter could draw our own Mindanao problem into the larger, more violent Islamist extremism that is now unfolding in the Muslim world.

End text
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